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# CORNHUSKER ECONOMICS

University of Nebraska–Lincoln Extension

## Nebraska's Sandhill Crane Migration: Opportunities for Additional Economic Activity

Each year in March and April, thousands of visitors come to Nebraska's Central Platte River Valley to witness a true wonder of the natural world: The annual migration of Sandhill cranes.

Several hundred thousand cranes gather annually along the Platte River to feed, court and gather energy before traveling further north to breed. Their numbers and fame are estimated to attract over 70,000 visitors, who spend on average 1.3 days in the region (Edwards and Thompson, 2010).

The scale of this wildlife event and the economic potential of bringing so many visitors to a relatively small region have attracted the attention of both the environmental and economic development communities. Four conservation research and education centers now operate in the area, each drawing thousands of visitors during the migration. Researchers have employed several methodologies to identify the economic impact of those who come to view the birds.

The most recent economic study estimates that crane related tourism in 2009 generated \$8.08 million in direct economic impact by visitors in Central Nebraska (Edwards and Thompson, 2010). For those interested in economic development, this raises an obvious and interesting question: Could the economic impact of visitors to Central Nebraska's crane migration be increased if other activities and attractions were available?

In order to explore that question, the Nebraska Nature and Visitor Center and the University of Nebraska Rural Initiative conducted a survey of visitors at several locations during the crane migration

Market Report	Yr Ago	4 Wks Ag	7/13/12
<b><u>Livestock and Products,</u></b>			
<b><u>Weekly Average</u></b>			
Nebraska Slaughter Steers, 35-65% Choice, Live Weight. . . . .	\$111.00	\$119.05	\$114.57
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame, 550-600 lb. . . . .	162.88	176.20	167.83
Nebraska Feeder Steers, Med. & Large Frame 750-800 lb. . . . .	147.55	155.19	143.81
Choice Boxed Beef, 600-750 lb. Carcass. . . . .	180.86	197.82	187.33
Western Corn Belt Base Hog Price Carcass, Negotiated. . . . .	93.18	96.10	95.96
Pork Carcass Cutout, 185 lb. Carcass, 51-52% Lean. . . . .	98.85	90.12	89.39
Slaughter Lambs, Ch. & Pr., Heavy, Wooled, South Dakota, Direct. . . . .	196.00	146.50	120.75
National Carcass Lamb Cutout, FOB. . . . .	400.63	340.49	333.77
<b><u>Crops,</u></b>			
<b><u>Daily Spot Prices</u></b>			
Wheat, No. 1, H.W. Imperial, bu. . . . .	6.71	5.79	8.13
Corn, No. 2, Yellow Nebraska City, bu. . . . .	7.34	6.21	7.85
Soybeans, No. 1, Yellow Nebraska City, bu. . . . .	13.86	13.55	16.04
Grain Sorghum, No. 2, Yellow Dorchester, cwt. . . . .	11.80	9.88	12.98
Oats, No. 2, Heavy Minneapolis, MN, bu. . . . .	3.70	3.30	3.92
<b><u>Feed</u></b>			
Alfalfa, Large Square Bales, Good to Premium, RFV 160-185 Northeast Nebraska, ton. . . . .	175.00	207.50	212.50
Alfalfa, Large Rounds, Good Platte Valley, ton. . . . .	135.00	140.00	175.00
Grass Hay, Large Rounds, Good Nebraska, ton. . . . .	72.50	97.50	147.50
Dried Distillers Grains, 10% Moisture, Nebraska Average. . . . .	200.50	211.50	274.00
Wet Distillers Grains, 65-70% Moisture, Nebraska Average. . . . .	72.50	70.28	100.00
<b>*No Market</b>			



of 2010. A short, two-page survey was offered to visitors at multiple locations including research and education centers, lodging establishments and roadsides. The survey could either be completed and collected on-site or returned by pre-paid mail. The effort resulted in 204 returned usable surveys.

Since this was not a random sample of visitors, but rather an opportunity sample, the results cannot be interpreted as being representative of all visitors to the 2010 crane migration in Central Nebraska. They are, however, an interesting portrayal of how this particular group views their experience with the crane migration and what other activities might interest them.

### **Characteristics of the Respondents and their Companions**

Respondents to the 2010 survey represented 27 states, with one Canadian also responding. Just under half (49.3%) of those responding indicated that their home state was Nebraska. An additional 22.9 percent of those responding indicated that they resided in a bordering state (CO, IA, KS, MO, SD or WY). The only non-bordering state to supply more than five percent of responding visitors was Minnesota (5.5%).

The respondents and their traveling companions represented a total of 742 visitors. The average party size for those responding was 3.6. However, several respondents reported being part of groups too large to travel in the average automobile (seven to 26 in the group). When those respondents are excluded from the analysis, the average size of a visiting party was 2.7. Among all respondents, the most frequently reported party size was two (42.2%), followed by three and four (17.2% each).

Respondents most often indicated that their traveling party included members between the ages of 56 and 70 years (61.3%). Respondents also commonly indicated that their party included members age 40 to 55 years (40.7%) and over 70 years (20.1%). Younger

visitors were much less likely to be reported, with respondents being least likely to indicate that their party included members age 18 to 25 years (6.4%).

Not surprisingly, given the age structure of those responding, visitors most often described their households as having no resident children (75.3%). Households with resident children under the age of 18 comprised only 17.2 percent of those responding.

For most respondents (54.9%), this was the first time that they had viewed the crane migration. For those who reported that they had previously visited the region for crane viewing, the average number of previous visits was 4.3. The most frequently reported number of previous visits was one (36.8%) or two (25.0%).

### **Purpose of the Trip**

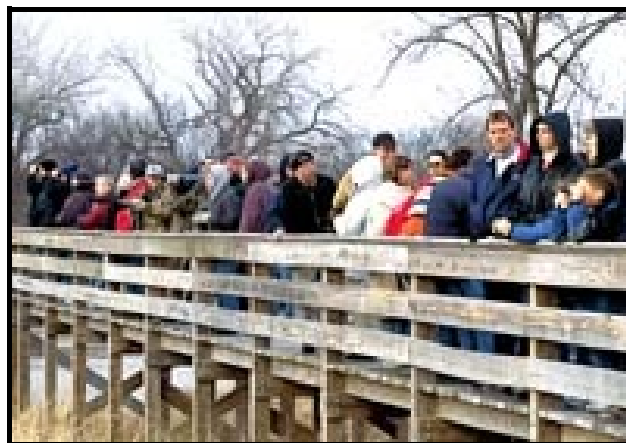
Crane viewing was reported to be the only purpose of their trip to Central Nebraska by 44.1 percent of those responding, while 39.7 percent indicated that they would visit other Nebraska attractions in the Central Nebraska region.

Visitors indicated that they would visit attractions in other parts of Nebraska 16.2 percent of the time, and 13.2 percent indicated that they would visit attractions in other states.

For out-of-state visitors, crane viewing was reported to be the only purpose of their trip 35.2 percent of the time. Out-of-state visitors reported that they would visit other attractions in the region 42.9 percent of the time. They were less likely to indicate that they would visit attractions in other Nebraska regions (18.1%) or visit other states (21.9%).

### **Planning the Trip**

Respondents were asked what information resources they utilized in learning about the crane migration and planning their trip. Responses were recorded on a five-point scale of importance, ranging from no importance to very important.



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The most frequently identified resource was the Internet, which was reported to be important or very important by 63.3 percent of all visitors, and by 68.7 percent of first time visitors. Birding, wildlife and nature organizations were identified as important or very important resources by 50 percent of all respondents, and by 53.8 percent of first time visitors. These sources were especially important to out-of-state visitors.

Previous visits to the region (without regard to purpose) were cited as being important or very important by 48.8 percent of the respondents, and not surprisingly, by 75.3 percent of repeat visitors. Previous visits were also noted to be important or very important by 22.4 percent of “first time” visitors. Since those individuals also indicated that this was their first crane viewing experience, we expect that they had traveled through the region or visited attractions in Central Nebraska previously for purposes unrelated to the crane migration.

Other information resources identified by the total respondent population as having been important or very important in learning about the crane migration were news stories and documentaries (48.2%), friends and relatives (47.1%), state tourism information (39.8%), area chamber or visitor information (37.8%), and magazine or newspaper advertising (31.6%). (See Table 1 on next page).

### **Other Interests**

The primary purpose of this survey was to identify activities that visitors to Central Nebraska might find interesting, in addition to watching cranes during their annual migration. Respondents were provided with a list of nine activities and asked to rate their interest in those activities, on a five-point scale ranging from “Not interested” to “Very interested.”

The most interest was shown in “Other Wildlife Viewing.” Among all visitors surveyed, 86.2 percent, (89.4% of overnight visitors), indicated that they were interested or very interested in such opportunities (Table 2 on next page). Strong interest was similarly shown in hiking or walking, with 69.4 percent of respondents reporting that they would be interested or very interested in such activities. More than 60 percent of those responding indicated that they would be interested or very interested in visiting historical sites (67.4%) and rural sights (64.0%).

More than one-third of those responding indicated that they would be interested or very

interested in dining out (58.4%), guided tours of attractions (42.8%), events or festivals (41.6%) or visiting a farm or ranch (36.9%). Respondents did not demonstrate strong interest in shopping opportunities; with only 20.7 percent reporting that they would be interested or very interested in that activity.

Responses to these questions did not vary greatly by visitor characteristic. Even among visitors whose stated sole purpose of visiting was crane viewing, and who intended to do nothing else during their visit expressed an interest in other activities, if at a somewhat lower rate than did other visitors.

### **Conclusions**

From this short survey, it appears that visitors to Nebraska’s crane migration are first and foremost nature enthusiasts. Nature-themed, outdoor and historical sights and activities all appear to have potential as attractions for this group. Coordinated marketing efforts, packages that combine various outdoor activities with actual crane viewing and guided nature-themed activities could all attract customers from among tourists attracted to the crane migration. For more traditional businesses, such as retailers and restaurants, hanging a “Crane Watchers Welcome” sign would signal support for those activities and might well attract customers.

A complete report from this survey is available from the University of Nebraska Rural Initiative Web site: <http://ruralinitiative.nebraska.edu/tourism/>

### **References**

Edwards, Richard and Eric Thompson, “The Economic Impact of the Rowe Sanctuary and Sandhill Crane Migration on the Central Nebraska Region.” University of Nebraska – Lincoln, Bureau of Business Research, 2009. Available at: <http://www.bbr.unl.edu/documents/52009-Rowe%20Report%2009.08.pdf>

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**Table 1. Importance of Various Resources in Learning About the Crane Migration and Planning for a Visit**

	Percent Indicating Important or Very Important			
	All Visitors	First Time Visitors	Return Visitors	Out-of-state Visitors
Previous Visits	48.8	22.4	75.3	36.1
Friends & Relatives	47.1	46.8	47.3	42.5
News Stories - Documentaries	48.2	52.7	42.4	48.8
Magazine - Newspaper - Advertising	31.6	38.3	23.6	27.9
Radio/TV	22.7	25.6	19.5	13.4
Area Chamber - Tourist Information	37.8	42.4	31.9	32.9
State Tourism	39.8	41.3	37.9	36.4
Sport Show	10.9	11.6	10.0	8.6
Internet	63.3	68.7	56.2	70.6
Wildlife, Birding, Nature Organizations	50.0	47.1	53.8	63.0
n responding	204	112	92	105

**Table 2. Respondent Interest in Other Activities**

Activity	Percent Indicating “Interested” or “Very Interested”							
	All Visitors	First Time Visitors	Repeat Visitors	Out-of-State Visitors	Nebraska Visitors	Likely or Certain to Return	Overnight Visitors	Crane Viewing Only Visitors
Other Wildlife Viewing	86.2	84.5	88.2	88.8	83.3	86.7	89.4	81.0
Hiking or Walking	69.4	70.3	68.3	71.4	67.4	73.1	71.7	66.7
Rural Sights	64.0	58.5	70.5	64.0	63.9	66.4	65.9	51.4
Shopping	20.7	18.0	24.0	17.9	23.8	22.5	20.5	20.8
Events or Festivals	41.6	38.7	45.2	41.4	41.8	46.6	40.8	40.8
Dining Out	58.4	57.4	59.5	55.1	61.9	61.1	60.8	50.7
Visiting Historical Sites	67.4	65.3	70.0	64.6	70.6	70.9	71.7	55.8
Visiting a Farm or Ranch	36.9	45.7	26.3	35.6	38.3	37.2	38.9	31.1
Guided Tours of Attractions	42.8	46.4	38.2	41.9	43.8	44.7	42.7	40.5
n responding	204	112	92	105	99	146	154	90